

## **Medic felt pressured to stifle ambulance fee support**

Judge rules county firefighters may campaign for ballot question

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

A volunteer paramedic says she felt pressure to suppress her opinions after she publicly supported ambulance fees in the county.

Pamela Boe, a medic with the Upper Montgomery County Volunteer Fire Department in Beallsville, said she was contacted by an attorney representing the county's Volunteer Fire-Rescue Association and her own chief after she wrote a pro-ambulance fee letter published in The Gazette.

In an Oct. 25 e-mail, the attorney asked Boe to retract or revise her letter.

Boe, of Dickerson, said she also received at least one harassing phone call.

Boe has volunteered as a medic for five years, previously at the Germantown Volunteer Fire Rescue Department.

A county ambulance fee would charge insurance companies, Medicare and Medicaid for ambulance rides.

The county's volunteer firefighters association led the opposition to the fee, which was the topic of a question on the Tuesday general election ballot. The campaign battle became more heated in the final days of the campaign.

Judge allows firefighters

to campaign

On Monday a Montgomery County Circuit Court judge ruled that the county's firefighters were allowed to campaign in support of the ballot issue.

County spokesman Patrick K. Lacefield said county employees, including firefighters, were expected to spend a portion of their work day Tuesday at the polls encouraging voters to vote "yes" on ambulance fees.

Judge Robert A. Greenberg dismissed a lawsuit filed by Eric Bernard, executive director of the county's Volunteer Fire-Rescue Association. The lawsuit sought to stop county spending on a campaign issue.

The association's attorney, John Bentivoglio, said the case was dismissed because the association waited more than 10 days to file the suit after it raised concerns over the use of county resources for campaigning.

County firefighters distributed pro-ambulance fee fliers, paid for by the county, while on duty and wearing their uniforms. Off-duty firefighters distributed election materials at the county's early voting sites.

County officials initially described these actions as educational. On Monday, however, Lacefield admitted that the county was fully advocating in support of Question A, on ambulance fees.

"One thing leads to another, and we just felt that it was important to make clear to folks what we felt more explicitly," he said.

County Attorney Marc Hansen has said the activity is legal.

Maryland Attorney General Douglas Gansler (D) has not issued an opinion on the county matter; a spokeswoman for his office said an opinion in a similar situation was that the county was allowed to advocate on ballot questions.

"It's both legal, and given what's at stake it's appropriate," Lacefield said.

County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) has recommended \$14 million in budget cuts — primarily to public safety — if the ambulance fee is defeated.

Bentivoglio said the association would determine after Tuesday's election whether it would take additional legal action against the county.

The volunteer association led the court fight to have the ambulance fee question placed on the general election ballot. The battle became increasingly divisive in the waning days before the election.

Under pressure

Boe said she was contacted by Bentivoglio after submitting her letter and having it published on several websites.

The letter was published in last week's Gazette.

Bentivoglio said Monday he never threatened Boe in the Oct. 25 e-mail.

"It was an appeal for her to be civil and not attack [Bernard] personally," Bentivoglio said, referring to comments in Boe's letter that are critical of Bernard and the association.

Bentivoglio also asked Boe in the e-mail to follow the Golden Rule.

"It's hard to see how a biblical teaching to treat people fairly and kindly can be seen as a threat," he said.

Boe also felt pressured by Upper Montgomery County Volunteer Fire Department Chief Earl Moore, she said. Moore declined to comment, but said Boe was still welcome at the station and was not being penalized for her comments.

He said Boe has the right to publicly support ambulance fees.

Boe said she notified Moore, vice president of the volunteer association, before releasing the letter.

"I didn't want him to be blindsided," Boe said. "This guy's like a grandfather to me."

Boe also appears in a 30-second pro-ambulance fee television ad paid for by the Vote for Question A Coalition, a political action committee that supports the fee.

Since Boe's letter was published online, she says she has received a harassing phone call at home.

"As far as I'm concerned, there's no conflict," Moore said. "Ms. Boe is free to do whatever she wants — we're a volunteer group."

Staff Writer Meghan Tierney contributed to this report.